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Effective humanitarian feedback mechanisms

Methodology summary for a joint ALNAP and CDA action research

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Contents

This paper summarizes the methodology for the joint ALNAP and CDA Collaborative Learning Projects action research looking at effectiveness of feedback mechanisms for affected populations in humanitarian settings. It outlines the research challenges faced and how these were addressed.

The next step is to finalise a desk study that will be fed into the results of a literature review and mapping of the main feedback mechanisms features as they are discussed in the literature. This will be one in a set of research outputs planned in this joint
ALNAP-CDA initiative.

At the time of writing, all research decisions had been taken but had yet to be fully applied in the field-based segment of the research.

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Research objectives, question and propositions

The main goal of this ALNAP and CDA initiative is to produce an evidence-informed guidance for humanitarian agencies on strengthening the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms for affected populations in humanitarian contexts. A working definition of humanitarian feedback mechanisms adopted for this study is provided in Box A below. More specifically this research has two objectives:

1. Identify which features of feedback mechanisms for affected populations are most likely to contribute to the effectiveness of such mechanisms as perceived by different user groups – including first and foremost, the crisis affected communities.
2. Provide robust, evidence-informed guidance to ALNAP network members on which elements should be identified and prioritised to help strengthen the overall effectiveness of a feedback mechanism for affected populations in a humanitarian operational setting.

Box A: Working definition of humanitarian feedback mechanisms

A formal system established and used to allow recipients of humanitarian action (and in some cases other crisis-affected populations) to provide information on their experience of a humanitarian agency or of the wider humanitarian system. Such information is then used for different purposes, in expectation of a variety of benefits, including taking corrective action in improving some element of the response.

The features that are commonly associated with effective feedback mechanisms (desirable/higher-level features) discussed in the literature broadly relate to: design and communication of the feedback mechanism; feedback collection and presentation; internal functioning of the feedback loop; and individual and organisational capacities needed for establishing and maintaining the feedback processes. (**Annex 1** presents the list of desirable/higher-level features that has been identified at the outset of this research).

Our objective is to test whether all, some, or none of these desirable/higher-level features are contributing to the overall effectiveness of feedback mechanism for affected populations in humanitarian settings. To test this, a twofold proposition was formulated:

a. an effective feedback mechanism for affected populations will always display all these desirable / higher-level features
b. a higher degree of manifestation of these features correlates with higher overall effectiveness of the feedback mechanism.

To probe and test these propositions, the research team was then confronted with six main research challenges, which are outlined below.

A. Research method

The overarching research question has been formulated as follows:

Which features of feedback mechanisms are most likely to contribute to their effectiveness as perceived by different user groups – including first and foremost, the recipients / crisis affected communities?

Qualitative or quantitative research design?

As the research question indicates, there is an expectation of a causal relationship between certain feedback mechanism features and the overall effectiveness of such mechanisms. Determining this in a way that produces robust evidence is challenging. It pushed the ANAP-CDA team to be explicit in articulating why certain research design decisions were taken, and which alternatives were considered. The decision to opt for a qualitative research design over a quantitative one was based on the following considerations:

- There is limited published information about 'humanitarian feedback mechanisms'. This 'label' is in itself seldom used. Instead it is often conflated – and at times used interchangeably – with terms such as 'complaints and feedback mechanisms' or 'complaints and response mechanisms'. This further compounds the challenge for the research team of not being in a position to estimate how many of feedback systems are currently established and in use (unknown population).
- Since this study does not aim to map all the different types and configuration of existing feedback mechanisms and this information is not readily available anyway, it is not possible to work with a representative sample size.
- Ethical issues, as well as the complexity of security and access, would militate against a random sample.
- The project has resource limitations, this means that only a small number of cases can be observed in detail (small-n number) (Munck 2004; Silverman 2010).
- There is uncertainty as to whether all desirable/higher-level feedback mechanism features with a relationship to effectiveness have been extracted from the literature, so our propositions may change as the research progresses (research variables are unclear or unknown) (Munck 2004; Eisenhardt 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007:25).

Why use a case-based approach?

A case study research design method was chosen (Yin 2012, 2004, 1994; Gerring 2007; Silverman 2010)
because:

a. We are not only looking for attribution but also an explanation. This research method is preferable when asking "how" and "why" questions (Yin 1994).
b. This method enables researchers to do an in-depth analysis of cases in their 'real-life' context (Yin 2004:111).
c. It is also preferable when the research team has little control over the events and it is difficult to draw the line between what is being studied and the surrounding context (Yin 2004:13).

d. While we cannot make a statistically reliable generalisation, we believe the method chosen is robust enough to enable us to generalise our findings across feedback mechanism types and across cultural and operational contexts using analytic generalisation (Silverman 2010: 144-150; Gerring 2004, 2007; Munck 2004; Yin 2003; Gibbert and Ruigrok 2010:71).

B. Challenges with measurement

What if there is no shared terminology?

The next research challenge is determining what is going to be described or measured and making sure that our research tools are measuring what we stated at the outset (construct validity), in a consistent fashion from one interview to the next, and from one case to the next (Yin 2003:34; Gerring 2012; Silverman 2010: 275-280).

Furthermore, terminology differs significantly from organisation to organisation. This is particularly challenging when describing the functioning and configuration of different feedback mechanisms, as we often deal with abstract or subjective concepts, such as 'cultural appropriateness' or 'attitudes of staff' towards communication and engagement with affected populations.

To get around these challenges, we have used three tactics to establish our definitions. The first is to produce a desk study that includes a literature review. This will map the use of terminology and concepts related to feedback mechanisms so to get we can get a clearer picture of the area of study (Yin 2012). More specifically, some of the issues covered in the desk study include: what constitutes a feedback mechanism; what types there are (taxonomy and typology) (Munck 2004:23-25; Gerring 2012: Chapter 6, pp.141-150); what features they have; how do organisations define effectiveness of the feedback mechanisms they run; and which feedback features they consider key contributors to improved effectiveness of the feedback loop.

The second tactic is to use existing agreed upon standards to help create our definitions. For example, we chose the OECD-DAC criteria's definition of "effectiveness" to inform the working definition of feedback mechanisms effectiveness that would be tested in the field-based segment of the research.

The third tactic consisted of a number of conversations within the research teams in ALNAP and CDA, and with a number of practitioners within the ALNAP network to refine our definitions and propositions. These discussions were later continued with practitioners and agency staff during the field visits to capture their perceptions on what is meant by 'effectiveness', 'feedback', 'staff attitudes' and so on.

C. Ensuring information collected is credible and accurate

Why is triangulation useful?

A subsequent challenge to address is ensuring that, once applied, the research design and overall case-based strategy would produce credible results. This is critical because unfounded or biased opinions could affect data gathering, alter capturing and analysis of emerging findings and ultimately skew the research results. Resorting to triangulation is a common choice made to mitigate against these risks. This is about 'mapping' one set of data upon another (Silverman 2010:63), and combining different ways of looking at a subject or case (method triangulation) or different findings (data triangulation). It entails looking at field responses, or emerging results from different angles, using different sources and, where possible, different types of data to minimise discrepancies (Gerring 2012:155-174; Silverman 2010:275-281). For this research we put in place two kinds of triangulation: one across interviewee types, and interviews (sources of data), and one for within individual interviews (types of data).

Seven types of stakeholders were identified (groups or individuals) as representing the different actors that establish, access and use the feedback mechanisms, or the data generated by such systems. These include: agency (or cluster lead agency) staff in management or decision-making positions who have initially conceived and designed the mechanism; agency (or cluster member) staff who is maintaining it on a day-to-day basis; the implementing partners who regularly access and contribute to the smooth running of the feedback collection and data entry processes; aid recipient and non-recipient communities who may both have the possibility to access the communication channels put at their disposal to submit feedback, complaints, suggestions, request of assistance etc.

Designing the interview protocol

The first step in designing the interview protocol is identifying proxies that may point to the presence of the desirable/higher-level feedback mechanism features that have initially been identified through the desk analysis. For example, when trying to see whether affected communities were consulted during the design stage of the feedback mechanism (one of the research markers of effectiveness for feedback systems), different sets of questions were customised for different stakeholder types. (See Annex 2) These ranged from senior staff in decision-making positions, to project staff, to community members including - wherever possible - marginalised groups. This process created an intentional overlap in the data points to be collected from different stakeholders, thus contributing to triangulate responses from several viewpoints.

Moreover, each set of questions aimed to include both objective (e.g. number of feedback entries; usage) and subjective questions (e.g. stakeholders' perceptions of the utility of the feedback system, and effectiveness of the response and follow up). This is to help ascertain what and how different facts are reported and perceived, and feedback features are manifested.

A final tactic is respondent validation. Here, researchers go back to the subjects of the study with tentative results and refine them in the light of their reactions, interpretation and additional suggestions (Silverman 2010: 380-382; Reason 1994; Reason and Rowan 1981). For this research, this is done at sub-office and provincial level, capital / country-office level and, whenever possible and appropriate, at inter-agency level.

D. Decreasing researcher bias

Striving to produce results that are reliable and replicable calls for: i) reducing as much as possible both anecdotalisms and researcher subjectivity (Yin, 1994:41; Silverman 2010: 268:274); and ii) trying to achieve a high degree of consistency in the way different data points are assigned to the same category by different observers, or by the same observer on different occasions (Hammersley 1992:67). Four ways to address this are:

1. **Addressing discrepancies** - during the field visits, both researchers, one from ALNAP and one from CDA, will attend all interviews and record their responses separately. Field notes will be then compared to identify areas of difference – that is areas where subjectivity is more likely to have occurred. Discrepancies and issues related to recall of group discussions or interviews will be then discussed on a case-by-case basis to reach to an agreement on fidelity of data recordings.
2. **Chain of evidence** - as part of the research outputs, the team will make explicit how conclusions were reached based on the linking of different data points, findings and observations (Yin, 1994:102; Ryan, 2005). This will be aided by the systematic recording of all conversations at data recording at field-level.
3. **Independent analysis** - at data analysis stage, each interview and focus group discussion will be analysed by the two researchers who will independently rate (on a 3-point scale) the presence (or absence) or one of more of the desirable / higher-lever feedback mechanisms features that were to be tested. The rating will then be compared and discussed within the research team. At data analysis stage, attention will also be given to capture any new feature – contributor to feedback mechanisms effectiveness that may have not been captured during the desk-based phase of the research.
4. **Consistent research protocol** - the selected field-based case studies will be completed by consistently applying the same research protocol (i.e. identification of same type of stakeholders, same seven set of questions; two researchers taking separate notes, same rating analysis etc.) thus aiming to obtain a set of data that is as comparable as possible.

E. Causality

The next research challenge encountered is around causation. This concerns establishing the presence of a link between the features identified at data analysis stage as contributors to effectiveness, and the overall effectiveness of the feedback systems (internal validity) (Silverman 2010: 15.2; Gibbert and Ruigrok 2010:713). Addressing this requires setting clear case study scoping criteria for inclusion in the research. This helps to ensure that the case studies are as similar as possible, giving us a restricted number of factors that may explain the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms for affected populations, as well as limiting the number of 'external' factors that may be contributing to their effectiveness.

For this research, we scoped feedback mechanisms for affected populations that were set up and established to:

1. **Operate at the project/programme implementation level:** the present research focuses at this 'narrower' level of operation, as we understand this as a necessary step before incrementally expanding the scope of future research iterations that may look at broader levels where feedback mechanisms might operate (e.g. inter-agency, inter-cluster). Furthermore, it is at this 'narrower' implementation level that the largest number of ALNAP members have been engaging and experimenting with feedback mechanisms in different crisis and operational contexts. Additionally, most documentation on agencies' experiences and learning on activities related to this come from this level of feedback operation.
2. **Improve the results at the project/programme implementation level:** this is in line with the most common purpose of feedback mechanisms and the definition of effectiveness drawn from the desk analysis, and reads as follows: the overall effectiveness of a feedback mechanism has been defined as the ability of completed feedback loop to bring about change that affects aid recipient populations.
3. **Operate in the context of on-going humanitarian operations**.
4. **Operate in a longer timeframe than the 3-months cut-off date after a sudden-onset crisis**: firstly, documenting the establishment of a feedback mechanism would not be possible as the team cannot wait for, or anticipate when, the next crisis event will trigger a response to a sudden-onset emergency. Secondly, even if the team were able to deploy during the early phase of a humanitarian response operation, issues of access and security would likely hamper data collection.
5. E**xplicitly deal with non-sensitive caseload (feedback) in addition to sensitive ones (complaints)**: mechanisms that only deal with Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) allegations or complaints and grievance with possible liability were excluded.

After having put in place the criteria necessary to choose comparable cases, we then used a modified pattern matching technique in the case study selection and data analysis stages. Pattern matching of multiple cases allows us to establish whether there are consistent relationships between the presence that we have hypothesised of the desirable/higher-level feedback systems features (xn) and the overall effectiveness of feedback mechanisms (y). If in all cases, where x is present y is present, and where x is absent y is absent, the results tend to strengthen the hypothesis, whereas if this pattern

does not exist, the results challenge the hypothesis (Booth 2008:3; Yin 2004:43 and 136-137). In the case at hand, the pattern matching technique was established as follows:

a. Cases were chosen if they met all scoping criteria and if all features were expected to be in place. This was ascertained by seeking as much information as possible on the feedback mechanisms established by the agencies interested in hosting the research team during the field visits.
b. These cases considered during the field visits will differ in terms of the type of the feedback mechanisms established (taxonomy; e.g. purpose, level of operation, timing and inclusion in the project/program cycle, communication channels and technology, etc.) so that our desirable/higher-level features can be investigated. Furthermore, the selected cases will differ in terms of the overarching factors that are culture and context-specific. This is to ensure that the feedback mechanism features relate to a wide variety of possible – but comparable – configurations of feedback systems, regardless of their operational and contextual environments.

In summary, we aim to select cases that are as similar as possible – within our particular research conditions – except for those factors that are specific to each feedback mechanisms observed in practice and their operating environment, so that our hypothesised desirable/higher-level features can be examined. The full body of data collected will then enable to identify features or factors common to all cases that were perhaps not identified prior to the field visits, but will need to be included or further examined in future research looking at feedback mechanism effectiveness.

Finally, specific interview questions were used to tease out any alternatives explanations for effectiveness of feedback systems. Capturing different stakeholders' perceptions and narratives about feedback mechanisms will be key in drawing a more complete picture of their functioning, of the roles of various stakeholders, and of the factors that actually contribute to effectively closing the feedback loop.

F. Transferability

The expectation for this research is to use case studies to generate findings that can be generalised to a theory of feedback mechanism effectiveness (set of theoretical propositions) (Yin 2012:9-10; Silverman 2010:143-150; Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010:714; Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007; Pawson, 2003) and thus supporting the testing and probing of our hypothesis.

This is contrary to generating findings that could be (statistically) generalised to the whole (or large n) of feedback mechanisms (Munck 2004). The cases of feedback mechanisms selected to be part of the case study are not - and are not meant to represent - a sample of all possible feedback mechanisms in use (Yin 2012:18-19). The aim is to establish a theory that can be transferred (external validity) to other agencies, to guide their work in identifying why and how different feedback mechanism features could be prioritised in different programmes to, in turn, strengthen the overall effectiveness of such mechanisms in bringing about positive change for populations of concern.

In an attempt to ensure that the results of the case studies can be transferred to other situations and settings that conform to the selection criteria used for this case study (see E above), we have selected case from a variety of different geographical, operational and cultural contexts. To the degree that the results are consistent across these cases, we would feel fairly confident that the results can be extrapolated and used to inform the drafting document shared with different agencies and actors in a network as large and diverse as ALNAP. Such guidance will thus be the final research output shared with Network members.

Annex A – Literature mapping of desirable/higher level features of feedback mechanisms

Below is a list, in no order of relevance, of the desirable/higher-level features of feedback mechanisms that were identified at the outset of this research through a literature review and desk analysis[1].

1. Periodic reassessment and adjustment	There are mechanisms in place and time is allocated to periodically reflect, reassess and make necessary adjustment to the feedback mechanisms (e.g. based on changes in programmes, context, security, access, and in beneficiary population etc.)
2. Cultural / context appropriateness	In the humanitarian context where the feedback mechanism is established it is 'normal' and culturally/socially acceptable to give feedback up the power gradient (for instance to staff in leadership and decision-making roles). The feedback mechanisms communication tools and channels are known and familiar to beneficiary group using it.
3. Expectation setting and knowledge	Beneficiaries/ communities are clear about what they can legitimately expect from the feedback mechanism and the organisation running it. Beneficiaries/ communities are aware of, and understand how to use the feedback mechanism (and are made aware of changes affecting them).
4. Feedback collection	Users perceive that the methods used for the collection of feedback are accessible, safe and do the job of channelling feedback information from the senders to the receivers. (Confidentiality is ensured where relevant)
5. Verification and analysis of feedback information	Feedback data is disaggregated based on the nature of feedback and complaints received (for instance smaller issues versus more serious or programmatic/strategic issues). Data quality is ensured (including through logging, sorting, checking, analysing and synthesising feedback data as appropriate). Feedback data is processed and shared paying attention to the user who will receive this information, and who is expected to use it.
6. Feedback acknowledgement, response and utilisation	Agency staff / field staff acknowledge the feedback received from users. Agency staff / field staff act on, or refer feedback received to the relevant party (within or external to the field project team, and if needed, external to the organisation). Relevant actors (e.g. other departments within the organisation, project partners, and national authorities etc) receive, acknowledge, and respond to feedback information so that changes can be made at the appropriate level.
7. Individual and organisational support	The feedback mechanism is run by staff with the relevant competencies and attitudes. The feedback mechanism is run by staff within an agency that: • supports and values giving and receiving feedback as part of general management practice • makes the necessary resources available for running the feedback mechanism.

[1]The literature review and desk analysis will be made available in the final set of research deliverable, which will also include: a set of three country case studies; a short practitioner-oriented guidance document on strengthening effectiveness of feedback mechanisms; and the summary of methodology used for the research.

Annex B – Example of question development process

In the matrix below, the first column lists the desirable/higher-level features of feedback mechanisms; the first row lists the seven types of stakeholders that were identified as representing the different actors that establish, access, and use the feedback mechanisms, or the data generated by such systems. The matrix below gives few examples of how interview questions have been formulated for different stakeholders.

Desirable / higher-level features	Stakeholder						
	Designer/ owner	Senior decision makers	Supervisor	Implementing partners/ daily implementer	Gatekeeper	Recipients	Non-beneficiary
1. Periodic reassessment and adjustment	Have there been changes made in the BFM (targeting, channels and tools activated, expected use, data entry, location, access) and why? How were these decisions made?			Does agency staff periodically ask you how the feedback mechanism is working? Have there been changes made to process used to collect feedback? How were these decisions made? How/ were you or others consulted /engaged?	Have there been changes made to feedback collection process? How were these decisions made? How were you / others consulted/engaged? Did the agency staff still come to ask if any changes were needed?		
2. Cultural appropriateness	/						
3. Expectation setting and knowledge	What is the purpose of feedback mechanisms for affected population in you agency? How is that feedback information useful to you in your role? How were recipients made aware/informed about: i) mandate of agency; ii) the mission/goals of the project (planned activities, timeline, targeted beneficiaries)? Do you feel that the feedback mechanism is seen as useful/ valuable by senior/management staff? Give examples of why or why not?			What is the purpose of the [feedback mechanism]? What is your role? Do you know what happens to all the feedback that you record? How were the beneficiaries informed about [feedback mechanism] and how to use it? Do they know how this information is used?	Why do you think the agency gathers feedback about their assistance? Do you know how the feedback information is used? Can you give examples?		
4. Feedback collection	/						
5. Verification and analysis of feedback information							
6. Feedback acknowledgement response and utilisation							
7 Individual and organisational support	Why do you think: i) allowing; ii) encouraging; iii) providing the means for beneficiaries to provide feedback is important?			Do you feel that agency staff see your feedback as important?	Do you feel that agency staff see your feedback as important? How do you know?		

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